Walter Seeba

Interview with Knight's Cross winner Walter Seebach, the Regimental Adjutant of 11. SS-Panzergrenadier Division 'Nordland', Essen, 1990. Seebach ended the war as a SS-Hauptsturmf&#65533;hrer (Captain), serving in Waffen-SS Germania/Wiking/Denmark. He was one of only 631 men awarded the very rare Close Combat Clasp in Gold.

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used a pioneer axe when his gun jammed.
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May I begin by asking what motivated you to join the SS?

Walter: In retrospect, I would have to answer it was my time in the Hitler Youth that sowed the seeds. I found that we would often be asked how we could better ourselves and our people and told that we should always look for improvement. The few times I saw marches or fanfare I noticed SS soldiers with shiny black helmets that stood out. For me they seemed very special and important, so as I grew up and the more I learned, I wanted to be a part of this organization, but I also knew it was hard to get in. I applied and was selected in 1937 after going through the rigorous exams and background checks. I was given the SS number 405 893. The SS was a very elite organization where very few who applied were accepted. In the beginning we joined with the understanding that we were parade and guard troops or special duty, as it is called. Most joined because of the elite status one had by wearing the uniform or sporting the SS pin on a suit. Membership gave me a pathway to move upward in rank. At this time the Waffen-SS was not formed, and we did no combat training, only sport and target practice. At the completion of my training I was sent to the regiment Germania. We lived in barracks much like the Wehrmacht and had to be ready for inspection at any time. As tensions grew with Poland we started field training and exercises to learn combat tactics and weapons. Talk was soon abounding that we would become the F&#65533;hrer's own military force, being used as he saw fit.

You were sent into action against Poland, what was this like for you? How did you find the Polish soldier?

Walter: Germania was at this time placed under the command of the army, Panzer Unit East Prussia [Panzerverband Ostpreu&#65533;en] was our name and [Werner] Kempf was our commander. We attacked into the rear part of the Polish army but found them very robust and ready to fight. One complaint our leaders made was that the weapons we were issued were old and outdated. Most Polish units had better weapons than we did. This war was a mobile war that the Poles did not understand, we would occupy their front, while reserves swung around to slice open a new breech, and the Soviets copied this later on. We had very young leaders who were very eager to attack; sometimes they launched us into attacks without the proper orders, which caused confusion. As a small force, we put the larger Polish army to flight; many surrendered to us when they saw it was futile to keep fighting. We had good weather in which to maneuver, and pioneers were handy at rebuilding bridges, so our advance was very fast; we could tell this was a new, almost exciting, kind of war. The enemy was surrounded so fast that he had no time to react. I saw Stukas for the first time and they wrecked Polish reinforcements that were moving up to engage us. I would look at all the destroyed vehicles with amazement that a bomb had such power. Our war with Poland was over very quickly, and they put up stiff resistance, but our will overcame theirs. As far as how I viewed the Polish soldier, he was tenacious at times and loyal to his nation. I had met Poles before the war who vacationed in Germany, and they seemed friendly; I harbored no hate.

From my experiences with them, there was no reason to dislike them, they bled as we did, and suffered as we did. We did tease them that their road to Berlin was a different one than what they anticipated, many laughed at the irony of it all ['Polish' (British) pre-war propaganda stated that the Poles would occupy Berlin]. Our medics treated Polish wounded just like Germans. One report floated that some Germans had been shot down in our area, and word spread to be on the lookout for witnesses. For all that has been written about our war with Poland, much of it is untrue. We went to great pains to avoid destruction, as a large area of Poland was actually German, so we went out of our way to bypass Polish units and let mop up operations force a surrender. In a few villages like this, the Poles burned down homes of Germans as revenge. I remember going through one such village, I no longer recall the name; civilians had been killed by Polish soldiers. That was hard to see for a young soldier. It made me feel like we had done the right thing by invading. After our fighting and victory we stayed as occupiers for a month, then I was promoted and sent away to train at the SS officer's school at Bad T&#65533;lz. The SS wanted men with combat experience to serve as instructors. This was a lucky break for me, as it then led to me being recommended for officer's school at Braunschweig; many famous names came through this school.

[Above: The SS were the guardians of the Volk, their Blood and Future. Heinrich Himmler had only six years of peace and proved it was possible to bring magic and mystery back to drab and boring modern mankind.]

You fought on the Eastern Front; can you tell me what it was like for you and how was the Russian soldier?

Walter: Yes, it was not a good time for the most part, I can assure you of that. The Russian winter was brutal, as were the soldiers. I joined Germania in the winter of 1941, having been promoted to SS-Untersturmf&#65533;hrer on the 9th of November in a solemn ceremony. After taking a leave, I was off to this new adventure and came just in time for the Russian offensives launched to save Moscow. Since our supposed ally refused to attack Russia [he's referring to Japan as the supposed ally], Stalin threw all his reserves into the center front and threw back every German division. The attacks were massive and used eastern savages who were trained to take no prisoners and allowed to conduct themselves in this manner. To make matters worse, the worst winter Europe had seen in decades settled on us, it was if the devil was protecting his lot. While it is not true that we were sent into Russia with no winter clothing, the supply lines were so backed up that what we had could not get to us. The call went out for the home front to help, which quickly sent supplies to us [this was done by the Winterhilfswerk des Deutschen Volkes (Winter Relief of the German People), who collected a staggering number, in the millions, of donated clothing]. By January the front settled down and warmer issued clothing now made its way to the men, but nearly all of us suffered some form of frostbite, temperatures dipped to 40 degrees below zero. This is where the utility of the PPSh [a Soviet submachine gun] came into being; our MP40 froze, these did not due to loose tolerances.

Many German units were cut off and surrounded in this first winter and I saw the Russians as a fanatical foe who threw men into mass attacks without regard for their lives. I even saw commissars shoot retreating men, which was their resolve for victory. I knew my men were in for a long fight. Lucky for us the Russian civilians were very helpful; most viewed us as liberators and gave what they could. I was able to stay in a small hut that had a fireplace. My men would often come in to warm up, and I had them gather wood for the couple. For a period of a few weeks it was quiet, as the cold made movement impossible, even for the Russians. I was seeing casualty reports come in with the weather taking more of a toll than fighting. We had many Hiwis [eastern auxiliary volunteer] who were former prisoners who helped us, and some were quite adept to the cold and helped tremendously. By the spring, the 'Wiking' division was created and we took part in offensives that seemed to have broken Stalin's back. The Waffen-SS was now seeing many non-Germans come into our ranks, which brought a great sense of pride. The Russian soldier I found to be poor, uneducated and brainwashed. Marxism was pumped into them day and night and it showed. They had been told terrible lies about the freedom wars, and about National Socialism. They had no sense of race or racial achievement. In their minds the world was ripe for their revolution and anyone opposed to being ruled by Marxists should be put away. The smart ones quickly surrendered and came over to us and joined into an army of liberation, which became very large by war's end. The best of the best even formed SS divisions, which fought well. I harbor no hate towards the Russian, but what they did at war's end cannot be overlooked.

"...chin up, gun ready."

You won the Knight's Cross; can you tell me how you won this high award?

Walter: Most of us will tell you this medal belongs to the men who fell, my men made this possible in the hardest fought battles. I prided myself back then for being a fighter. I led my men with a conviction that we were fighting for a noble cause, to free other men from enslavement. To this, the men of the Waffen-SS pledged our lives, believing we may see home again. I had no fear of what the enemy could bring and I never let my men feel scared or alone; our watchword was chin up, gun ready. I will tell you I served under Hans Dorr [Obersturmbannf&#65533;hrer (Lieutenant Colonel), he died on April 17, 1945. He was wounded 16 times during WWII!], who was a great leader; I learned to be fearless, and to engage the enemy at any opportunity. Hans would go out of his way to find a weak spot to launch a limited attack to gather prisoners or intelligence. I went out with him many times, winning the Iron Cross First Class for breaking up attack points. He was hard to keep up with, but I managed and always had some humor to show. He was a very brave warrior who you would have liked meeting. The actions that brought the recommendation for the Knight's Cross were during the battles of Narva [lasting from February 2 - August 10, 1944]; we were holding a battle line with Norwegian soldiers of 'Norge' and the Russians broke through. I was ordered to push them back, and I had many new soldiers. I gave a quick speech and urged them to remember we fight for their homes, their families, and their honor. We hit the point of the advance and took the enemy in hand-to-hand fighting. They outnumbered us by a large margin, but my men fought better, and pushed them back.

One comrade, who resembled a gruff Norse warrior, used a pioneer ax [this ax he's referring to could be from the actual pioneer soldiers employed to perform engineering and construction tasks, or a common civilian ax used for cutting, chopping, and splitting wood] when his gun jammed. He cut down several enemy while running and swinging like a wild man. We settled into defensive lines and had to repulse several attacks to hold this area. This helped stabilize the lines for the moment. I had become quite numb to the dangers of war, and charged at the enemy like a wild boar, it seems so surreal today. We beat back wave after wave of attacks to retake this area. I was surprised to be put up for the Knight's Cross; my actions were small, and I only followed orders. My men deserved this medal more than I did. Because there was day after day of close combat, I was also awarded the Combat Clasp in Gold, which is rarer than my Knight's Cross. Our propaganda company reported that we saw the whites of the enemy's eyes more than 50 times and prevailed.

[Above: This mythical Close Combat Clasp in Gold.]

What was the mood of the front in 1945 during these last battles?

Walter: If you read some of the post-war stories and memoirs, one would get the impression it was a mood of gloom and futility. My experience was quite different, my men would agree with this as well. Most everyone knew the war was lost by the end of 1944, yet we fought on. Why? We understood we were fighting a terrible plague and that if we failed, the world would be lost and handed to the hordes of the devil. Eastern Europe was in the greatest upheaval in history, millions were fleeing the Soviets, roads and rails were clogged and movement was extremely hard, add to this the strafing of refugees and it was sheer madness. Surprisingly the people held together, they helped each other in a real spirit of comradeship. Our mindset was, and our orders were, to hold up and slow down the Soviets anyway we could, to let as many civilians escape. Problems always arose when bridges were destroyed, our pioneers proved their mettle building makeshift ones and we tried to keep the people away from our columns to avoid strafing attacks on them, but this was impossible. The Soviets viewed anyone retreating with us as the enemy and reaped a large death toll on civilians. I saw this happen many times in those final months. German rear guard units in turn took a terrible toll on the advancing enemy; they suffered the greatest losses in the final months, testament to our resolve for buying time for refugees to escape. We were a funny sight, I might add. We wore every type of uniform, and even

some non-uniform pieces, as combat troops we were allotted a certain level of freedom to dress practical. Only those who had never tasted combat looked in amazement at our motley collection, with many attempting to speak bad German; all of Europe was here in those final months. My morale and that of my men, and indeed all of the Waffen-SS, was very high, even if some were fatalistic; we still had our oaths to fulfill and to fight until that last breath. That was our resolve.

I understand how sensitive a subject this is, but how do you feel about the accusations directed towards the Waffen-SS being a criminal organization, and accused of multiple war crimes?

Walter: Yes, I told you this was not speakable in the open. There are endless trials that haunt us, endless witnesses who claim this or that happened. Do we bear guilt of war crimes? I would welcome the trials as a fair way to exonerate ourselves, but the problem is the trials are not fair. The witness cannot be questioned as to their honesty, and a proper defense has hardly been allowed, if at all. Now this is not the case in all trials, Oradour for example, the men were found not guilty of burning the town and killing civilians in a church. Likewise, in other French cases, the French have shown they have been fairer than the British and Americans, certainly more than the Russians have. I have heard that teams were sent out all over Europe looking for anyone to tell stories about German abuse and crimes, without any real investigations, all to make the Allies look like noble crusaders. These were then sent for trial, with the 'witnesses' having a free hand to say whatever they wanted or were directed. The defendants could not defend themselves, and it was forbidden to deny the event happened in several cases. I know many former soldiers who were tricked, forced, or coerced into signing confessions that admitted guilt, or stated they were eyewitness to a bogus event. You know that I am very skeptical of all claims made by former enemies as to our wartime conduct.

With me saying this, I will also tell you that if anyone is guilty of war crimes or illegal executions, they should be charged and tried in a fair setting. We had an extreme sense of honor and fair play, if that honor was broken, a guilty person should pay the price. The SS was no place for criminals, or criminal behavior. We would, and did, punish our men if they broke rules of war, or harassed civilians, even the simple act of stealing eggs could bring harsh punishment. It is ironic that the Russians claim German soldiers raped endless Russian women, but I can assure you this is a lie, any soldier who did this would have been shot without remorse. I know of no cases where SS men were charged with this offense. The worst I saw was a Russian mother filed charges against one of my men for impregnating her 20-year-old daughter. We found she willingly had the relationship, so the case was shelved. As former SS men, we tried hard to defend our honor, but the newspapers, radio, and now television all present the Allied view of the war, and seldom defend us. SS men were shot on the spot execution style, tortured, beaten, deprived of food, and had their families persecuted. All because we have an enemy who claims we did these same things first, which is simply not how we conducted ourselves. Even after your President came to honor our dead, nothing changed; calls to silence and censor us have only gotten louder.

[Above: Nordland Knight's Cross award ceremony. In the background the halftrack vehicle is marked with the sunwheel swastika, Nordland's symbol.]

[Above: Johan-Petter Balstad, Untersturmf&#65533;hrer of the 11th SS Nordland Division. Note his Tank Destruction awards on his sleeve.]

Seebach's Knight's Cross recommendation:

'The proposed individual - who has been employed as a regimental adjutant since 01.05.1943 and on the significant list of the regiment since 01.05.1943 - has since the early days of January taken over the 5./SS-Pz.Gren.Rgt. 24 "Danmark". Following the heavy anti-partisan fighting in Croatia (Hrastovica), this Kompanie was unfit and no longer combat ready. Obersturmf&#65533;hrer Seebach was supplied with forty recruits to supplement the group leaders and, in the shortest time (ten days) brought these men to a high standard, making them fresh and ensuring the unit was fully ready for employment by 15.01.1944 in the Oranienbaum Pocket.

His freshness and fighting spirit was passed along to his young Kompanie, which was clearly evident during the fighting retreat below.

On 30.01.44, Seebach led the night groups of the regiment from the position at Opolje - Kerstowo into the new positions on the Luga. Through his leadership and energy he reached 5. Kompanie, despite being continually pressed by the enemy. They reached positions around 06:00 hours on 30.01.1944 without great losses.

On 31.01.1944, at about 16:30 hours, the enemy began their attacks against the sector of 5./SS-Pz.Gren.Rgt. 24 "Danmark" (Danish No. 1). They were led by two Russian regiments in several waves and lasted until the morning hours of 01.02.1944. Eight armed attacks were identified. The position was held until 01.02.1944.

This was thanks to the frontline leadership and excellent attitude of the brave Kompanie leader, Obersturmf&#65533;hrer Seebach, who in bold attacks constantly threw back the enemy. At 20:30 hours, Seebach was wounded by shrapnel in the foot (his seventh wounding in this war!). Despite this wound, he continued to personally lead his Kompanie and, after detecting the enemy, led a Kompanie squad to success. When his wound became aggravated by non-treatment and the initially only slightly battered foot bones broke, it took an order from the regiment to take him back and another Kompanie leader replaced him.

This example shows the excellent bravery and strong will displayed to the Kompanie, which fought with boldness and liveliness. The remaining Kompanien of the battalion, with which Seebach fought where the fighting was thickest, recognized his strength and the defensive resistance was strengthened considerably through Seebach's example and his strong Kompanie.

This was the position until the early morning hours of February 1, and a breakthrough of the regiment's front by the enemy was avoided. This tactical success, thanks in large part to Seebach, allowed the various elements of the division to plan their withdrawal to the bridgehead in the area of Jamburg and prevented the premature rupturing of the Luga front on the 31.01.1944, which would have had a bad effect on upon the overall situation.'

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